

ST. GREGORY PALAMAS' CRITIQUE OF NOMINALISM*

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One of the representatives of the indigenous Hellenism in Southern Italy, Barlaam was very well received by the Byzantine humanists and the aristocratic circles, when he arrived in Constantinople. He came with an intention to study Aristotle on the basis of the original Greek texts. Behind the facade of an apparent cohesion, in Constantinople, at that time, there was a tension between the promoters of Hellenism, who sought to restore the philosophical tradition of Neoplatonism, giving it a greater autonomy from the Christian doctrine and spirituality (known as the “humanists”), and the defenders of a more mystical, ascetic and hesychastic theology based on the Christian Tradition.

For the Byzantine Humanists, Barlaam's attempt to approach theological issues from a purely philosophical perspective was, of course, attractive, because it promoted their agenda. Using the *apophatic* theology of Dionysius, Barlaam affirmed an agnostic denial of the possibility for *theognosia*, the knowledge of God. Adding to this the Aristotelian argument that the divine transcends all demonstration, Barlaam offered himself as a formidable opponent to the hesychasts. Barlaam sustained that Greek philosophers ruled out the possibility of any demonstration of the divine, because of their foundational belief that the divine transcends human reason. In this framework, what ancients received through contemplation, we can attain now through study and diligence. Through dialectical syllogism, we can logically elucidate simple and partial impressions received by philosophers via divine illumination. Moreover, only the dialectical syllogism can deal with all things, even with the knowledge of the divine. A disciplined and dedicated study of secular

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sciences can purify the soul's understanding and lead to its assimilation with the divine archetype. It is *theognosia* by analogy, *analogia entis*, the analogy of existence between created beings and spiritual, archetypal ideas, inherent in God. This analogical way grants to the human mind the possibility of penetrating the being of God through the study of created reality. Barlaam's preference for dialectical syllogisms as a mode of access to the knowledge of the divine granted to him the possibility of reducing theology to philosophy.

Barlaam's criticism on the hesychastic method of prayer was put forward by making these assumptions:

At the *anthropological* level: he sustained an anthropology based on a platonic spiritualism; his accusations implied a supposed identification of the supernatural with immateriality.

At the *gnosiological/epistemological* level: the very fact of considering the human body as a receptacle of grace appeared to Barlaam as an intolerable abuse. That because the "return to self" of the hesychastic method was understood not only in the spiritual sense, but also bodily: the body participates in the act of knowledge. Barlaam sustained that the access to the ultimate reality can be *only* an act of the mind mediated by the hierarchy of the beings.

At the *ontological* level: Barlaam followed the tendency he inherited from the Hellenism to despise matter, and to oppose the material to the spiritual.

Gregory Palamas, developed, as a response, a *realistic doctrine of supernatural knowledge*, independent of any sensible experience, but a knowledge that was given to the whole man (soul and body). Barlaam's *agnostic nominalism* (implying that there is no possibility of a direct knowledge of the reality of God) was an attempt to express a reaction to the *intellectual realism* of Thomas Aquinas. And Palamas' answer was, again, a form of realism, but another kind of realism, an *existential realism*. So, if we can distinguish here two versions of realism (Aquinas' and Palamas'), I consider the one expressed by Palamas to be the *stronger version of realism*. I will now try to explain why.

Palamas does not oppose spiritual to material but the *supernatural to created world*. In his perspective, supra-rational knowledge is to be preferred over Barlaam's rationalism (Meyendorff 1998, p.204). He affirms that humans as created beings are bound by their own created state, but when they transcend their own status communicating with God through the divine energies, they *participate* in the uncreated life. Knowing God does not require certain externalisation between a subject of

knowledge and the object known, but a *union* in the uncreated light; man has no created faculty with which he can see God; to have a vision of God becomes possible because God unites with man, sharing the knowledge that He has about himself. Any revelation, any participation, any deification, is thus, a free act of the living God: *a divine energy*. It is very important to note that the dispute between Palamas and Barlaam was one of exceptional difficulty because of two different uses of the same philosophical ideas and terminology. Barlaam followed the classical Greek use: concepts, abstractions, ideas formed from inference. It's a version of the *rational-demonstrative attitude*. But Palamas had to use language in another way, because he had to describe a concrete and immediate mystical experience, so he necessarily used the philosophical terms and ideas as signs, as pointers. This is a version of the *experiential attitude*.

That is why Palamas finds himself in the situation of re-signifying again and again the meaning of certain terms. He feels he has to do this, because coming to terms with the unmediated experience of God, through the vision of "light", Palamas clearly understood that any use of language can only be a "pointer", and not a description. He regards the terms "light" and "darkness" as both appropriate: "light indicates the supreme positive character of the experience", "darkness indicates its radical transcendence vis-à-vis all else that we know" (Gregory Palamas 1983, cf. 2, 5, 1). Palamas insists repeatedly that, when talking of divine reality, we cannot speak with exact precision, but only by the way of a symbol, image and analogy (Kallistos Ware, 1977, p. 53). Palamas' discourse has an amount of ambiguity, and the reason for this is that the discourse followed the *apophatic* way, the baseline for all eastern theology. More than that, we can talk about an "intended destabilization" of theological language. That is because theological language, while conceptualizing created beings' experience of God, must also call attention to and acknowledge its own shortcomings. No worthy conception of God can be attained through the intellect alone, as true knowledge of God comes from God, leads to God, and conforms to God.

The palamite signification of *energeia* was the milestone in supporting this version of strong realism. Looking for a proper term for the light of Transfiguration, Palamas decides to use Aristotle's concept of *energeia* (Bradshaw 2004, p.231). Initially Aristotle uses the term by taking it from Plato: Plato made the difference between the possession (*ktēsis*) and the usage (*hrēsis*) of things (Platon, *Euthydemus*, 280 b-e). With Aristotle, it becomes a distinction not between possession and usage in general, but between the usage and possession of a capacity or a faculty of soul. It is important to note that Aristotle admits the existence of several grades of

reality. Aristotle's reasoning is that if man is a simple being, man's sole proper work is to attain truth; on the other hand, if man is composed of several faculties, his proper work is that of the highest among them. Consequently, the one who is active in thinking, lives and exists more than the one who is not, and although the highest grade of reality is not described as an actuality (*energeia*), it is affirmed that a person who is at the highest grade of reality is active (Aristotle, *Protrepticus*, B 86). The understanding of *energeia* as an activity can thus receive its technical signification of *actuality*.

For Aristotle, *energeia* is that kind of activity that is its own goal and can exist only in a state of fulfilment. It is both the substance's cause and the thorough reality, regardless of the appearances it takes. For all of these reasons Aristotle finds *energeia* worthy of the highest appellation he can give it, that of divinity. In using the notion of *energeia* to create a distinction from essence or nature, Palamas proceeds very cautiously, because the theological vocabulary of that time was too deeply marked by the essentialist categories of the Greek philosophy. Palamas feels that this use of *energeia* is necessary in order to express the existentialist reality of the Supreme Being. Paradoxically, in the context of using this concept, the Byzantine author was also being pre-occupied in liberating the theological discourse from Aristotle's traditional philosophical categories due to their inadequacy in expressing the mystery of the divine communication with man. For example, Palamas refuses to call the energies "qualities of God", because the quality notion cannot contain the liberty dimension in any way, whereas these energies are the expression of God's sovereign will. The doctrine of the immanent energies implies an intensely dynamic vision of the relationship between God and the world. The whole cosmos is a vast burning bush, permeated but not consumed by the uncreated fire of the divine energies. These energies are "God with us". They are the power of God at work within man, the life of God in which man has a share (Kalistos Ware 1975, p.121). Palamas' theology of Light is not a theology which makes use of rational concepts to express abstract realities, but is, on the contrary, the *apophatic* expression of a mystical experience culminating in the beholding of God (Lialine 1946, p.282).

In this way, we can better understand the use of the term by Gregory Palamas in explaining a critical aspect of his doctrine: the signification of the ultimate reality (in other words what content can be given to the notion of reality when the description of the transcendent is the goal). When discussing about the divine light (as *energeia*), Palamas states that it is a *natural symbol*, but he denies that it is a *created symbol*. The argumentation is that a natural symbol always accompanies what it

symbolizes, and its existence depends on it, just like the aurora accompanies the sunset, and the heat accompanies the burning power of the fire because of the innate association (*Triads* 3,1,14).

If *energeia* or the divine light has this meaning, then what we call a natural (or physical) reality has a much broader signification. The physical reality is not a static, inert one, but matter plus energy: it is something that can be described as an active alive process, where we find the presence and the intentionality of a Person and that as a *natural dimension*. On the other hand, we can state that, in this description, ultimate reality is constituted by experience in a most radical way: the ultimate reality is the human experience of the uncreated energies. Any statement that would aim at something beyond the content of this experience, such as the direct knowledge of an essence, is rejected. At the same time, the gnosiological/epistemological pessimism of agnosticism is rejected: the Supreme Personal Reality is not something that cannot be known due to its transcendence, because it makes itself known by its manifestations called *energeia*. In the case of God, the nature, or *physis* from which the divine energy proceeds is the essence (*ousia*) of God, while the hypostasis using the energy is in this instance threefold, because the persons of the Trinity act always together. The "consequence" of the energy, the *energima*, is the effect of God's activity in the created world. Thus, there is a significant difference between *energeia* and *energima*: the *energima*, as the consequence of God's action, forms part of the created order, but the energy which brings it to being is making itself uncreated and eternal (Ware 1975, p.131).

Palamas chose to signify the radical transcendence of the inaccessible aspect of the Ultimate Reality by qualifying "essence" with "superessential" (*Triads* 3, 2, 7). It is a way of explaining the vertical relationship between God and created being culminating in deification. The hierarchy of God's noetic, linguistic, and experiential relationship with the created world illustrates the interplay between God's accessibility and inaccessibility. The object of the vision in deification is "technically" inaccessible, in that, as created being, it cannot approach the divine energies. Deification requires the "uncreation", and is beyond sensation, intellection, and all forms of knowledge. The divine light transcends all beings, all created things. The deified subject "sees" the divine light to the extent that the subject is "uncreated", but no knowledge follows from this state. God's noetic accessibility decreases as his experiential accessibility increases. The superessential essence of God transcends the inaccessibility and accessibility of the divine energies. The name "God" itself refers to the deifying energy. The divine superessence, however, is "more than God",

more than the energetic revelation of God, and it exists beyond all affirmation and negation. God is both “God”, the sum of the names attributed to God based on divine energies, and “more than God”, the superessential divine essence (*Triads* 3,13,31). There is a non-being by transcendence which is accessible to created beings when they are uncreated, a non-being which is not the divine essence; the superessential essence of God transcends even this non-being. When created being crosses into the uncreated dimension, it experiences both the immediate presence of God and God’s incomprehensibility. Beyond this, however, there still lies the *Hypertheos*, the “more than God”, the absolute inaccessible superessential essence of God (Anastos 1993, p. 349). The multitude of divine manifestations cannot harm the unity of God, for God is beyond categories of whole and parts. Remaining unknowable in His essence, He is revealed in full in each energy, as a living God. God, by virtue of His simplicity, is totally present in His essence and His energies; in this way, Palamas gives an answer regarding the problem of link between the absolute divine and the world. Between God and His creatures there is *no independent reality*, but God himself, and through a free condescension, it is this reality. Divine energies are not things different from an ultimate “thing” that would be the essence of God. Grace is not an object with which God would reward his creatures, but the very manifestation of the Living One.

We could think about an analogy between the recent advances in science (especially quantum physics) and hesychasm concerning the nature of the ultimate reality. Bernard d' Espagnat, in his book *On Physics and Philosophy*, affirms that the notion of reality *per se* is considered to be totally independent of our capacity of knowing, and is correlated with the hypothesis that we have direct access to what we call reality (that we can say something true about it). But a number of scientists and philosophers of science sustain that the concept of reality includes in its semantic area *also* the representation build on what is independent of us (based on the phenomena, i.e., human experience, which can be built without direct reference to reality *per se*). It is clear that the current semantics of the concept of reality actually contains two major versions, corresponding to a realistic description and to a representationalist one. These two versions conflict each other (d' Espagnat 2006, p.14). But, it is important to note that Palamas' understanding of the possibility of knowing the ultimate reality *surpasses* this dilemma. Because, as I have already said, there is no need to postulate an independent reality between God and His creatures: God himself *is* this reality. That is why it has an exceptional value not only for theology or philosophy, but it also can offer a model for our scientific understanding of the world. It is here that d' Espagnat is particularly

relevant: The question that now is important in physics is the question regarding the "real nature" of what, in a rather negative language, is called "Something". This role assigned to "Something" suggestive of integrity, of a whole, is a completely alien notion to the minds of classical physicists (Ibid, p.17).

In addition, we have to note that hesychasm is different than other spiritual practices, at least in Christianity, by the fact that it emphasizes experience in the shape of an experiment: it is supposed to be a method, with a verifiability criterion, and validation; the method works if it directs us to the ultimate reality, or, in hesychastic language, to the attraction of the uncreated energies. In experimentation what is decisive, the truth criterion, is what is provided by the "appeal to experience". In modern science this much is clear; but I wish to claim that also for hesychasm we had the same kind of exigency; this is evident, when Palamas, in the heated disputes with his adversaries, used to invoke repeatedly the appeal to experience as a criterion.

André Scrima, a Romanian theologian and philosopher offers some reasons why spiritual experience may be considered a valid research object. Firstly, spiritual experience is a manifestation and a sign of a possibility, of a fundamental aspect for human condition. The human being is a "being of experience". As Scrima indicates, the term "experience" derives from Greek, from *peira*, that means "try out", and its root seems to be identical to the one of the term *pyr*: fire. Experience would be then what comes out of *trying out*, knowledge by trying things out. Scrima states that the spiritual experience must also represent a study object, because any experience of this kind is creative, founding values, bearing a vision of the world, therefore, a way of founding a cultural tradition (the cultural tradition being understood as live communication and progressive manifestation of a global truth) (Scrima 2008, pp. 198-199). It is worthy of note that this notion of *trying out* also is implied in French phenomenology. Michel Henry talks about the *self-trying out* as the main dimension of the earthly existence of man (Henry 2003).

In Palamism, the distinction between immaterial and supernatural is implied, thus affirming the possibility of a non-symbolical knowledge of God, and of an effective relationship between God and man. This kind of understanding has exceptional value for contemporary thinking regarding reality. Asserting the existence of an Eastern-Christian philosophy in our days cannot be made without considering the doctrine of St. Gregory Palamas as a central landmark. And if we can talk about an Eastern-Christian cultural model, the hesychast controversy can be considered as a turning point in defining its shape.

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